



The Insider

Norman Abjørensen worked close to CSIRO's chief and director of communications for 20 weeks, more than enough for a highly experienced journalist to assess them and CSIRO's other managers. This is his first-hand story.

Chaos just trails in his wake, a close colleague said (and by no means disparagingly) of Geoff Garrett, the British expat hired from his adopted South Africa 4 years ago to run Australia's main government research agency, the CSIRO. But the question is whether Australia can afford the chaos already trailing in the wake of the embattled and publicly invisible Garrett, who takes obvious delight in jolting CSIRO audiences with his brutal change mantra: "If it ain't broke, break it".

Garrett's idiosyncratic management style, heavily reliant on a "management by numbers" approach, is unsettling to many. Just before Christmas Garrett asked two senior managers to drop everything and come up with ways to reduce the amount of email traffic, even if that entailed an "email free day". Garrett's missive was, of course, sent by email.

Garrett was hired to drive change in an organisation that the Howard government and sections of industry were

considering increasingly irrelevant despite more than seven decades of service to Australia, but the full implications of his agenda are yet to be appreciated and his unorthodox methods continue to raise hackles.

That Garrett is a visionary there is no doubting, and he works punishing hours that more often than not extend over 12 hours at a stretch. However, growing numbers of people in Australia's science community are questioning both the vision and the effort put into its pursuit.

The word closest to Garrett's heart is "enterprise", and his goal is to transform Australia's premier research institute into a research enterprise – that is, a profit-making consultancy for hire. Underpinning the change process is a push to make CSIRO more relevant to both the needs of industry and the government's woolly National Research Priorities, but the transformation comes with a high price: a phased reduction in the public good research on which CSIRO has built its reputation.

What Garrett has set in train is a massive power shift within the organisation, the implications of which are just starting to be recognised. Power within CSIRO has traditionally derived from the allocation of resources, but this is moving swiftly away from scientists to the increasingly powerful business managers within CSIRO's Business Development and Commercialisation group (known as BD&C, which one CSIRO wag dubbed "Bad Dudes and Cowboys").

The argument goes that such a process will free up the time of scientists to focus on science rather than chase funding and attend to business affairs, and to some extent this has a certain validity. But it does wrest away from scientists the crucial decisions about what to pursue and what not to pursue, and inevitably the commercialisation potential will be paramount.

This has already generated tensions within CSIRO at several levels, but most noticeably in regard to communications. The Board has sought to encourage a greater media focus on science but the business managers continue to press for an emphasis on business deals and commercial arrangements. The latter almost always prevail, even to the extent where business managers rewrite media releases.

The cosyng up to business by CSIRO has obvious advantages in terms of external earnings, but it also has a downside that concerns many current and former employees – that is, the perception that the immensely valuable CSIRO name is for hire to the highest bidders. This has already led to a number of skirmishes that insiders say will inevitably multiply in the months ahead. Already there have been recorded instances of companies seeking token involvement with CSIRO in order to use its name to bolster their standing – and in some cases their share price.

Interestingly, Garrett's abiding heroes are businessmen, not scientists. Management books line his fifth-floor office on

Canberra's Limestone Avenue, his speech is peppered with management jargon, and his wall is adorned with a framed quote by the former head of General Electric, Jack Welch, about winning and having the best people.

Garrett came to his post in Australia quite unaware of the ferocity of Australian politics, and he has never come to grips with the processes. He has remained concerned that his drive to transform CSIRO has been resisted and criticised by the Labor Party, and he has complained to close associates that his attempts to be "mates" with Senator Kim Carr, Labor's former science spokesman, were rebuffed. The fact that CSIRO now lacks its traditional bipartisan support is of concern to many people in the organisation, including members of the Board, but there seems little chance of that changing.

mental to the organisation, he had his then communications director, the respected science journalist Julian Cribb, write a number of newspaper headlines that might be expected to be generated by the change. McIntosh faxed them off to the minister and the proposed changes were quietly dropped. McIntosh was a good communicator who understood the need to relate to the media and he was both accessible and visible.

Garrett, however, has had trouble with communications since the day he started. Three communications directors have served on his watch, and a similar number of managers, but so far none has managed either to project Garrett and his dream or co-exist with his quirky agenda.

Garrett is ever suspicious of internal communication, seeing its prime objective as neutralising or even stifling

When I complained later that journalists were telling me Garrett was invisible and the ABC had given up on inviting him to talk about "big picture" science, Staunton said: "He won't do it and doesn't see that as part of his job".

It remains to be seen who actually speaks for CSIRO. The organisation's public silence on the gene technology issue has seen all state and territory governments implement moratoria of varying degrees blocking further research that has the capacity to earn Australia billions of dollars.

Garrett simply refuses to engage. A suggestion that he host Christmas drinks for the media was rejected (later I learned that he was concerned someone might ask him about his contract, which was up for renewal). An earlier request to appear as a guest on Margaret Throsby's popular ABC-FM morning spot, which

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In keeping with someone who rose to prominence in white-ruled South Africa, Garrett is seen by many to be too willing to bow to government whim. Many people in CSIRO were dismayed at how research into an eastern Victorian aquifer, commissioned by the former science minister, Peter McGauran, was used for partisan purposes in last year's election campaign, especially since the aquifer was in the minister's own electorate. A certain disquiet continues to simmer over the far-from-transparent funding arrangements for the \$250,000 research project.

In contrast, the revered former head of CSIRO, the late Dr Malcolm McIntosh, was not averse to telling the government to back off when he sensed CSIRO's interests were being threatened by it. In one celebrated incident, when a proposed change to government policy was regarded by McIntosh as being detri-

dissent. Ever since the weekly internal email newsletter, Monday Mail, carried an item headed "Life After CSIRO" by a former employee who had accepted redundancy (according to the hits measured it was the most read item in years), Garrett has insisted on vetting the copy before it is published. This is widely known and serves only to diminish the publication to a management tool rather than serving as an authentic staff voice.

I was hired in August last year as communications manager. Part of my brief was to "position" the CEO and Executive as "open and transparent leaders", but Garrett very quickly told me he was not going to be "positioned". Puzzled, I asked the latest communications director, Donna Staunton, what she made of this. She replied: "Don't worry. Geoff thinks positioning means making him out to be something he is not."

would have offered benign exposure, was rejected without explanation.

Staunton, a Garrett appointment, is not ideally placed to dig him out of his media hole as she, too, is the subject of continuing media interest and scrutiny stemming from her days as a lobbyist for the tobacco industry and her well-remembered statement to a parliamentary inquiry in 1995 that there was no scientific evidence that tobacco was addictive. She has yet to publicly retract that view – something that concerns many people in the scientific community who regard her past as being in conflict with scientific truth.

A former head of CSIRO Entomology, Dr Max Whitten, was among those who questioned Staunton's appointment (which has been raised on several occasions at Senate Estimates). Dr Whitten wrote at the time that the appointment "might sit uncomfortably with CSIRO's



much-publicised Preventative Health Flagship, which promotes healthy living”.

As a result, Staunton herself will not talk to the media (which is extraordinary for a communications director), and will not appear where she might be questioned (as in a recent Australian Science Communicators conference, from which she withdrew after initially accepting an invitation).

Her own attempts at media management have been heavy-handed to say the least. *Australasian Science* journalist Dr Peter Pockley, a persistent critic of the Garrett regime, was all but frozen out of the CSIRO media effort, and his repeated requests for interviews with Garrett and Staunton were first rejected and then ignored. Garrett branded Pockley as “unhelpful”.

Concern about lack of publicity for the Flagships led to a suggestion by Mehrdad Baghai, who resigned as head of BD&C in February, that Communications “punterise” the story by dressing it up for the tabloids, most notably Sydney’s *Daily Telegraph*, which Garrett and others have noted is the Prime Minister’s favourite newspaper. When I protested to Staunton that the *Telegraph* was not interested in serious science reporting but would love a scandal she responded: I agree ... but just make it sexy ... cures for cancer, science helping people’s lives”. In other words, lay on the glitz with a trowel, raise false hopes among cancer sufferers and damn responsible reporting.

Conversely, Staunton sought to minimise media coverage when Garrett

asked Garrett to confirm that Staunton had sent two journalists from her media unit into the June hearing with instructions to “eyeball and intimidate” any reporters there, especially Aban Contractor from *The Sydney Morning Herald* who had written stories about Garrett deemed to be hostile. “This is complete news to us,” Garrett responded but agreed to take the question on notice.

Such an act might well have constituted a breach of privilege and displayed an alarming naiveté about the media in the press gallery, who would write their stories either from watching the proceedings on closed circuit television or from Hansard transcripts. But then Staunton, who has told me and others in CSIRO how much she loathes the media, has never worked in the media. Indeed, her total experience in communications before she went to CSIRO, first as a consultant and since last March as the \$330,000 per year communications director (\$52,000 more than the Prime Minister), was a mere 16 months according to Pockley (*AS*, July 2004, pp.12–13).

Her riding orders are to deliver whatever Garrett wants. Contrary advice is out of the question as this is branded “disloyal”.

One highly experienced communicator, who was told while on maternity leave that her position was to be “reviewed” when she returned, was described to me by Staunton as someone who was “a member of the old guard” who had been “disloyal to Geoff”.

“... Staunton had sent two journalists from her own media unit into the June hearing with instructions to “eyeball and intimidate” any reporters there...”

Pockley wrote last year: “It is puzzling why Garrett imagined that CSIRO’s salvation was to put their public presentation in the hands of someone whose tobacco industry connection had the potential to become an ongoing story in itself and a source of distrust within the organisation” (*AS*, April 2004, pp.37–38).

and other senior CSIRO executives were due to appear before a Senate Estimates committee hearing on 2 June last year after an earlier hearing had probed Garrett’s awarding of unadvertised contracts worth \$740,000 to an old South African mate, Ian Dean. In Estimates on 16 February, Labor Senator Kim Carr

Further, she had friends who were known to be hostile to Garrett, and she was not to be trusted.

Trust under these circumstances is strained, and Garrett appears to trust very few people, and this suspicion has spread throughout the organisation. People are careful about what they

discuss, and with whom, as conversations are often reported back to managers. In one recent incident, a manager responsible for a tender process was in a quandary after his superior mentioned in conversation the name of a tenderer who was known to the supervisor and with whom “Geoff was comfortable”. In an environment where winks and nods prevail, the manager regarded this as sinister.

According to Whitten, Garrett has insisted that division chiefs be appointed on 3-year contracts. Whitten says this is an attempt to tie them to Garrett’s whim and also makes a mockery of any long-term planning.

I needed to “reconsider” my position. I did, and resigned in December.

A tall, awkward, gangling man who has a tendency to lean into someone’s face when he talks to them, Garrett has trouble reading Australians – their nuances, their body language, their humour – and few are noticeable in his inner circle.

Garrett can be curt and abrupt with colleagues, once telling a senior officer who rose to leave a meeting because he had people waiting to see him: “You go only when I say you can go, and I haven’t finished yet”.

One long-time staffer who has regular contact with Garrett said she found him

“restructuring” in February – an issue that senior management refuses to address other than to resort to corporate weasel-speak with the standard phrase of “continuing to review our investment portfolio”.

In a rare published article in *Australasian Science* (September 2003, pp.41–42), Garrett expanded on his plans with a verbal flair that would have had Don Watson quivering with excitement when he wrote that “CSIRO will continue to deliver world-class science outcomes across our core capability in research areas ... Our priority-driven core research is the single largest program by which we will address our strategic goals ...

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Garrett’s avoidance of any sort of public profile – and as one of the highest paid public servants, on a salary of \$420,000 per year, one might reasonably expect him to have one – extends even to matters involving him personally. When he was criticised at Senate Estimates over the Ian Dean contracts, it was his chief finance officer, Mike Whelan, who was sent out to defend him in public by claiming that the contracts had provided “value for money”. And in July 2002, when Whitten wrote an article in *Australasian Science* (later republished *The Age* and *The Canberra Times*) that was critical of Garrett and his style, it was not Garrett who responded in those papers but his deputy, Dr Ron Sandland.

Staunton has been at the forefront in seeking to establish a Garrett cult, having him always referred to as “Geoff”. To profess a regard for Garrett is seen apparently as a career enhancement for CSIRO employees. When I expressed my misgivings about him and the management culture in general, Staunton became agitated, telling me that perhaps

especially irritable in the afternoons, so she resorted to taking chocolate to him “to raise his blood sugar levels” and improve his mood.

There are dangerous contradictions in Garrett’s reforms that are far from resolved, not least in his championing of a “one-CSIRO” brand while also pushing his multidisciplinary Flagships as specific entities. The Flagships, described by Garrett in the borrowed phrase of “big, hairy, audacious goals”, are designed to pursue cutting-edge research in six designated key areas: water, energy, oceans, light metals, preventative health and food. The Flagships, financed by a rising levy on each of CSIRO’s 21 divisions (but being reduced to 19 in July), have created new funding tensions of their own and also a sense among research units outside the Flagship structure that they have been downgraded.

It is unclear what the future holds for several non-commercial arms of the organisation, including its priceless national collections, and fear that widespread redundancies are on the cards have been realised following the latest

One of the major reasons for CSIRO’s existence is to deliver research outcomes to our stakeholders.”

Increased external earnings are central to the Garrett plan, and the financing of the Flagships is tied to this with required increases in the current triennium of 11.1%, 13.1% and 6.7%, respectively, but so far Garrett and Baghai have achieved 3.6%, 8.1% and 1.8%. And with Treasury forecasting a drop in the growth of the Australian economy, hopes of a windfall in committed R&D from industry are somewhat optimistic.

Garrett’s supporters say he is saving the organisation from irrelevance or even dismemberment, but even if he succeeds in creating a profit-making research consultancy the question has to be asked: does a government really need to own a consultancy?

Norman Abjorensen brought to CSIRO a wide range of experience in media and public relations. He was senior writer with *The Canberra Times*, national editor of *The Sydney Morning Herald*, News Director of SBS Radio and Senior Communications Adviser for the Pharmacy Guild of Australia. On his resignation from CSIRO, the Pharmacy Guild immediately invited him back as National Campaign Manager.